

Housing Topics from the ZRG meeting on June 9

Parts of the City

- Village Centers
- Neighborhoods
- Corridors (Rt. 9, Needham Street, Washington Street)

Reforms need to consider the economic viability of what zoning allows and encourages, so that projects can actually be built. Likewise, the long-term effects of building on the City's finances and affordability should be considered.

How to resolve conflicting goals, set priorities and make trade offs? We may need to identify some mechanism or calculus that allows us to set priorities and make trade-offs when some interests are at odds with others (historic preservation and affordable housing, e.g.)

- Identify conflict resolution mechanism

We should create "soft edges" around village centers and corridors to protect single family neighborhoods and to increase density near village centers to buoy their vitality — "the donut." The right mix could be achieved through various innovative zoning methods.

Opportunities

- Create village center zones or overlays, possibly "center" and "periphery" zones
- "Mixing Zones"

Zoning Barriers

- Height and stories (allow three stories)
- Lot area per unit (eliminate, or make sensitive to unit size)
- Zoning districts (single residence vs. multi-residence zones, is the map right?)
- Allowed uses (two family and three family)

Large houses are expensive and difficult to maintain. Often they are too large empty-nesters. We should expand the provisions that allow additional density in existing structures in appropriate areas to create more diversity in the housing stock. Alternatively, some larger older homes could serve well as professional offices for lawyers, doctors, engineers, etc. These low impact conversions should be allowed in appropriate areas.

Opportunities:

- Creation of accessory apartments/dwellings
- Home businesses and professional offices

Zoning Barriers

- Set a moving "look-back" period (10+ years)
- Lower required area, frontage
- Allow more uses, by site plan review (rather than special permit)

Need for a full range of housing steps, so that people can transition from one type of house to another, rather than endlessly building up our housing stock till we only have large houses for established, wealthy families. Currently, there are few options for downsizing in Newton for empty nesters. One side effect of this is that larger, emptier houses are not available for growing families who then choose to expand their starter home, reducing the number of starter homes available in Newton.

- Housing steps: Studio => 1-2br small apartments => small starter homes (detached or attached) => single family and two family homes => 4+ bedroom homes => smaller

condominiums (near village centers) for empty-nesters => residential care facilities (again near village centers)

- Control impacts through FAR and building size more than use
- Maybe limit the increase in size of houses (additional relief required if you increase the house by more than 20% of the current GFA, or similar)

Rather than only including limitations, the Zoning Ordinance should employ incentives for public benefits such as affordable housing and preservation of historic structures.

Opportunities

- Bonus density, stories, height for affordable units
- Bonus density near transit
- Tax incentives for affordable housing
- Additional dwelling units for restoration of historic structures

A significant improvement in the process could be made by identifying a mechanism (a body and appropriate rules) for administrative review of projects which are “nervous by-rights,” not something that absolutely needs a special permit, but where special care should be made to meet specific requirements and meet the character of the neighborhood. This could include a design review process, a review board, or planning department staff.

- Can provide insulation from politics
- Has more predictable, up front process
- Speeds up approvals

“Intent” should be expressed for all zoning districts, overlays, and regulations. This aids in later interpretation and revision.

Rather than creating new provisions for Single Room Occupancies, we should embrace a similar market by allowing (and encouraging) studio sized units, in and around village centers.

For next time

- Accessory apartments
- Large mixed use developments
- Inclusionary zoning (effectiveness compared to incentives, hotels)
- Parking
- Process

Opportunities outside Zoning, per se

Tax incentives for affordable housing development
Changes in Aldermanic rules (re: special permits)
Staff responsibilities and resource allocation